

The power of comedy

Curious Comedy Theater's Stacey Hallal uses improv to help with literacy skills, assist dementia patients and even train police

BY SUE ZALOKAR
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After about 10 years of research and study, partly with Chicago's Second City, Stacey Hallal brought what she learned back to the Rose City and, in 2008, opened the nonprofit Curious Comedy Theater.

The group performs its own main-stage improv, sketch, and it does standup comedy shows two to four days a week. The theater celebrated its seventh anniversary Oct. 9.

As artistic director, Hallal designed a curriculum inspired by her time on the faculty at Second City Chicago to share with curious Portland students. The group also does outreach in the community, using improv to increase literacy skills, improve quality of life for dementia patients and, soon, to train police officers in Hillsboro on how to apply improvisational thinking to difficult situations they might encounter on the street with people experiencing mental health issues. There's nothing funny about that, but Hallal stresses the importance of thinking on your feet.

Another outreach program of Curious Comedy Theater is the All Jane Comedy Festival. Now in its fourth year, the festival features female comics from across the nation. Considering that "only 17 to 19 percent of the industry in Hollywood in writing rooms and at major comedy festivals are women," Hallal said, the gender-specific nature of the festival gives women an opportunity to showcase the amazing talent of female comedic writers and performers. The content is not female-specific, though, and organizers and comics alike encourage everyone to check out one of dozens of shows during the five-day comedy festival.

The All Jane Comedy Festival began Oct. 14 and runs through Sunday at various locations around town. You can learn more at www.alljanecomedy.org.

Street Roots talked with Hallal, who was calling from a business trip in Michigan.

Sue Zalokar: *Michigan, huh? What are you doing in Michigan?*



PHOTO BY NICK LYON, COURTESY OF STACEY HALLAL

Stacey Hallal: I have a day job. I'm a marketing consultant. It's not like a full-time, office day job. It's a freelance job that I do. I travel about a week a month, and I use improvisation to help big brands to better understand storytelling.

S.Z.: *Interesting. So you apply the technique of improvisation to marketing for businesses?*

S.H.: Yep. The company is called Character LLC. I've done about 150 brands (in the past 15 years).

S.Z.: *That's interesting. Improv is a specific skill. I'm a musician and a writer, but being an improvisational thinker, in terms of art, is very challenging for me.*

S.H.: Improvisation teaches you how to

be in the moment. It teaches you observation skills. It teaches you listening skills, cooperation skills, give-and-take, in addition to the actual storytelling skills.

S.Z.: *The pulse of comedy in Portland – what is that like from your perspective?*

S.H.: That's a great question because when we opened The Curious Comedy Theater seven years ago, there were a couple of great institutions that had been here a long time, but they weren't really connected to each other. They were kind of islands in and of themselves.

In general, Portland was not supportive of comedy. Everyone loved our music and our local food and local filmmaking scene, but comedy?

When we first opened, we made posters that said, "Dare to laugh," and

handed those out with free tickets. It was hard to even give away free tickets.

In those seven years, in the spring of 2008, Bridgetown (a Portland-based comedy festival) started and we opened that fall, and then about a year and a half later, Helium (Comedy Club) opened. Those things, plus "Portlandia," really changed Portland's attitude about comedy.

Comedy can be cool, and local comedy can be awesome. Now there is a great audience out there, and there are comedy shows all over the city every night of the week.

S.Z.: *So when you say, "We opened in 2008," you're talking about Curious Comedy Theater. Tell me about that.*

S.H.: That was something I had dreamed of for about 10 years. When I first moved to Portland from Eugene, I fell in love with the city. I decided I wanted to someday open a theater. I was just starting improv and I didn't really have the skills or the credentials or the resources to do something like that.

I spent the next 10 years, building that up – including moving to Chicago for four years – to study at all the Chicago Institutions there. I studied at Second City, and I did the Second City Conservatory and their writing program and directing program. I assistant-directed a Main Stage show at Second City. I felt like I was ready to come back to Portland and open a place.

About six months after I moved back, I found the space we're in.

We opened on a shoestring and a lot of good will from the friends I had and the community we had built.

S.Z.: *Your mission says that the theater programming "improve(s) the lives of kids, adults, and seniors through the art of comedy." That must be pretty rewarding.*

S.H.: It really is. It's pretty awesome. Even our shows, I think, are a contribution to the community. We give a lot of voice to people who aren't normally given opportunities to have their voices heard. Our ensemble is fairly well-balanced male to female, more than your typical improv theater across the nation. Our shows are